

## THE ICONOGRAPHY OF EARLY ISLAMIC LUSTERWARE FROM MESOPOTAMIA: NEW CONSIDERATIONS

Among the enormous range of early Islamic ceramics the monochrome lusterwares from Mesopotamia have always presented an enigma with regard to the deeper significance of their iconography. They show seated or standing human figures, frequently depicted with peaked caps and long hair, or various animals. Their execution is naive. The image, broadly drawn in dark luster on a white ground and enhanced by innumerable luster dots, is surrounded by narrow white margins.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, some of these images have been explained as Central Asian or Indian motifs of Buddhist origin, which might have found their way into Islamic lands on portable wooden panels, paper manuscripts, or even textiles, carried on the numerous caravans commuting between Asia and the West.<sup>2</sup> However, such an influx of artifacts was not the only way in which Buddhist culture could have been transmitted to the West. Since the early years of the Islamic conquest in the East, Muslim encounters with Buddhism had been much more direct. During their advances in the seventh century, the first Muslim conquerers had met with several Buddhist dynasties in Central Asia and in the eastern regions of modern Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Their capitals and urban centers, such as Merv, Bukhara, Nishapur, Balkh, and Ghazni stunned the invaders by the abundance of religious art and architecture, like the stupas and temples adorned with religious sculptures, images, and frescoes, and the richness of Buddhist monasteries.<sup>4</sup>

In the years to come, Islam started to establish itself gradually in these areas, but in a way that still tolerated the coexistence of Buddhism to a very large extent and respected the cultural and artistic heritage of that religion.<sup>5</sup> Thus, mosques were built next to the old stupas and the new Muslim population did not hesitate to visit such religious monuments and even to attend Buddhist ceremonies.<sup>6</sup>

The knowledge of Buddhist monuments and religious practices was, moreover, not confined to the local Muslims of Central Asia and eastern Iran. Even in the West, interest in the culture and art of Buddhism grew

with the number of reports and narrations brought back by Muslim soldiers and travelers. Subsequently, geographers and historians were sent as envoys to collect concrete information about all aspects of that ancient and still powerful religion, and these people then transmitted even more details of Buddhist aesthetics and art to the other parts of the Islamic empire.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Muslims became interested in Buddhist objects, and as late as the tenth century various artifacts, including gold and silver Buddhas, were recovered from Buddhist sites or even especially manufactured to be sent to prestigious "collectors" all over the Islamic world.<sup>8</sup> This interest continued over many centuries. Even when the religion itself had been virtually replaced by Islam in all eastern regions of the empire in the course of the tenth century, the remaining Buddhist monuments were not obliterated and continued to impress their artistic influence on Islamic works of art for some time to come.<sup>9</sup>

While thus a Buddhist influence may be reflected in some of the luster images, another very detailed and far-reaching interpretation explained such figures on lusterware as depictions of star constellations, adapted to the ceramic medium by Islamic craftsmen who relied very closely on the imagery handed down to them in Arabic translations and copies of ancient Greek "star books" and astronomical treatises, or on surviving ancient astronomical instruments such as celestial globes.<sup>10</sup> These globes had their surfaces covered with images of the constellations whose purpose was to demonstrate and solve problems regarding the position of individual stars.<sup>11</sup> The iconography of these astral images was widely adopted by early Islamic scientists, both for the construction of new globes commissioned by Islamic rulers, many of whom were intensely interested in astronomy and astrology, and for illustrating astronomical treatises, such as the *Book of the Fixed Stars* by Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi written in 964 and, according to his own testimony, illustrated by images traced directly from a celestial globe.<sup>12</sup> It was this book which was to become one of the most famous and influential astronomical manuscripts in Islamic times, and its im-

ages became widely known, since the book ran into many "editions" over the centuries and the images were frequently repeated on subsequent Islamic globes.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Sasanian paintings with figural representation of planets and constellations might have been yet another inspiration for the decorators of early Islamic lusterwares. Such images were known to have enhanced the throne halls of Sasanian rulers to create the illusion of a perfect reflection of the universe, with the king as representative of the omnipotent sun seated in the center. Various sources give us vivid descriptions of the rich layout of the throne hall of Khusraw Parviz, known as Taq-i Taqdis. The room was surmounted by a dome symbolizing the upper hemisphere. In its center the ruler was depicted as though enthroned in heaven, surrounded by the sun, the moon, and all the stars. Fixed stars, the twelve signs of the zodiac, and the seven planets, each running through its phase, seem to have been assembled in a kind of artificial planetarium moving against a fixed background and revolving around the throne below. The throne itself likewise revolved according to the seasons and zodiacal signs. The knowledge of such splendid cosmic spectacles in the Sasanian palaces may well have inspired contemporary and early Islamic craftsmen alike.<sup>14</sup>

All these considerations stress more or less foreign influences, which, originating in very different media, entered the decoration of the group of lusterwares under discussion here. However, if one follows up the astrological significance with which these lusterwares have been credited, another, and very direct, iconographical influence of strikingly similar style may also be cited, and this influence has hitherto been seriously neglected in the study of these wares. It derives from the very land in which the wares originated, namely Mesopotamia, and it even uses the same medium — pottery. An examination of the local atmosphere in which the lusterwares were executed makes this very clear.

In early Islamic Iraq — as in many other parts of the Muslim empire — a far-reaching preoccupation with astrology characterized many aspects of daily life. To a greater or lesser degree it affected the various communities settled in Mesopotamia. Paganism contributed most directly to the survival and spread of ancient astrological superstitions and beliefs. Its followers, found among the urban population and the Bedouins alike, continued long into early Islamic times to venerate the ancient native deities, all of them personifications of planets. Thus, Shamash represented the sun, Sin the moon, Bel personified the planet Jupiter, Nandi

and Nergal stood for Mars or Saturn, and the old Babylonian goddess Ishtar was identified with Venus.<sup>15</sup>

Many Mesopotamian cities — Edessa, Hatra, Nippur, and even Baghdad — were urban centers of planetary worship.<sup>16</sup> Hardly any of them maintained such a prominent and long-lived importance in the survival of astral paganism as Harran, however. In this town positioned on the banks of the Balikh, a tributary of the Euphrates in northwestern Mesopotamia,<sup>17</sup> the sect of the Sabians had worshiped the seven planets since at least the nineteenth century B.C., when Sin, the moon god and head of the pantheon, was called upon to ratify treaties.<sup>18</sup> This deity, acknowledged here as in many other parts of Mesopotamia as the elevated chief god and supreme being, was venerated alongside the Sun, Ishtar (Venus), and the other planetary deities Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, and Mercury.<sup>19</sup> To each of these deities a particular day of the week was allotted, and this was the day on which he was to be venerated.

The temples built to these planets conformed in their arrangement in the temple district and in their hierarchical order proportionally to the distance separating each planet from the earth, an ingenious system elaborated carefully by the astronomers. Each individual temple had its own peculiar shape and color, and the idols allotted to each were of a particular substance.<sup>20</sup> Such a well-organized cult and closely knit pagan community were thoroughly immune to any missionary attempts from the outside, and it is not surprising that neither Christianity nor Islam had any significant impact on the local beliefs and practices.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, as late as the ninth century the pagans of Harran obtained official permission from the Muslim governor in the area to continue the practice of their rites in public, and such tolerance ensured a survival of astral paganism as practiced by the Sabians in Harran long into the eleventh century A.D., if not later.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the old Babylonian gods venerated all over Mesopotamia, several foreign gods of Greek or Roman origin were incorporated in pagan worship from the early days of Hellenistic and Roman influence on the region (fourth century B.C. and first century B.C. respectively), because of their correspondence with the local planetary gods.<sup>23</sup> Zeus was seen as being identical to the ancient Mesopotamian god Bel, both of them standing for the planet Jupiter. Kronos represented Saturn, and Hermes was worshiped alongside the native deities Tir and Nabu — all three as personifications of the planet Mercury. Other Greek gods that were venerated included Oceanus and Apollo.<sup>24</sup>

The worship of these divinities was officially practiced in special temples with large numbers of idols, but their veneration also figures constantly in daily life, to ensure the permanent protection of the gods or, better still, to avert their demonic and evil influence, which resulted, according to popular belief, from the harmful constellations of these various planets.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, according to ancient Babylonian beliefs, which were still alive and current in the seventh century, the turning of the planets in conjunction with the zodiacal constellations was responsible for the fate of the world and for the destiny of every single individual.<sup>26</sup> Such convictions resulted in the creation of awe-inspiring and negative images of the planetary gods, who were in time downgraded to evil demons. These had to be kept at bay to avert harm.<sup>27</sup>

The means to achieve this were manifold, and required great skill, which could only be gained by studying the art of magic thoroughly for many years. The ability to exorcise demons had been considered a science since Sumerian times,<sup>28</sup> and subsequently an extensive literature developed, dealing with the subject in various ways.<sup>29</sup> Many texts were concerned with practical occultism alone, introducing the reader to magic symbols such as curious letters, circles, squares, or even figures as aids against various evil spirits.<sup>30</sup> One such document from the thirteenth century in its frontispiece even calls upon Solomon, the ultimate master in dealing with evil spirits.<sup>31</sup> His figure is framed by the names of the four planets, Zuhra (Venus), Mushtari (Jupiter), Zuhā (Saturn) and 'Utarid (Mercury). These were intended to increase still more the magic power of the image and to release the influence of the zodiacal signs. Other manuscripts were meant to be amulets in themselves, containing the image of one particular demon and a relevant invocatory formula.<sup>32</sup>

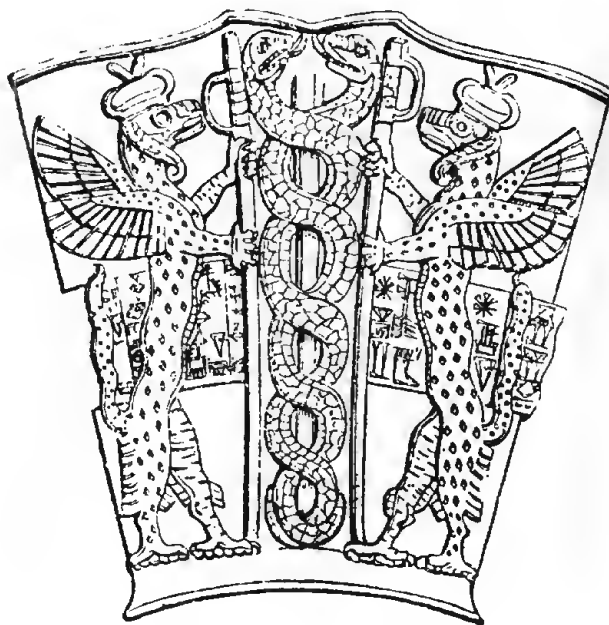
A third category of book, like the others still popular long after the Muslim conquest, comprises medical manuscripts, the science of medicine being one of the most important aspects of magic in the lands of the Fertile Crescent.<sup>33</sup> In these the ancient magical images and symbols of astral paganism (to a large extent based on ancient Babylonian figurations like those preserved in Harran by the Sabian community) survived and were employed as therapeutic talismans against the evil spirits of disease.<sup>34</sup> Thus a medical treatise called the *Book of Antidotes* in an edition of 1199 has a frontispiece with clearly pagan astral connotations (fig. 1). The center of this miniature is occupied by a lady, seated cross-legged and holding a crescent. Her image is



1. Frontispiece miniature from the *Kitāb al-Diryāq* (*Book of Antidotes*) copied in northern Mesopotamia in 1199. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. arabe 2964.

framed by a round medallion formed by two dragon-headed snakes, whose bodies curve and intertwine in four round knots. According to one interpretation, this image represents the moon goddess Ningal, wife of the moon god Sin; her attribute was the crescent.<sup>35</sup> The framing, interlacing snake bodies likewise belong to the ancient symbolic repertoire of Sumer and Babylon, where snakes were held in high esteem for their outstanding healing powers (fig. 2).<sup>36</sup> Here they were believed to be attributed to Ningal in her function as patron or even protector of the book to intensify the healing virtues of the manuscript and to enforce the representations of exorcism throughout the text, which were all directed against the multiple demons tormenting the human body and inflicting diseases on it.<sup>37</sup>

Another study of the image suggests an even more concrete astrological context. Guitty Azarpay has suggested that the juxtaposition of the entwined dragons and the lunar emblem identifies the theme as a reference to the pseudoplanetary nodes of the moon's orbit, which were seen since Babylonian times as fearful dragons, whose heads and tails effected solar and lunar eclipses and were therefore of the utmost astrological importance. Here they threaten the moon, but their effectiveness is hindered by the magical knots in their bodies.



2. Libation cup of Gudea of Lagash, 2144–24 B.C. Paris, Louvre.

Perhaps this frontispiece was indeed a talisman against the astrological threats imminent at the time of its very production, because the date of the completion of the manuscript corresponds with that of the occurrence of a partial solar eclipse in the Near East on January 28, 1199.<sup>38</sup>

The practice of magic according to the guidelines set out in manuscripts like these and the practical task of exorcising divine planetary demons lay in the hands of the sorcerers who could be found in many Mesopotamian villages and towns,<sup>39</sup> either as individual practitioners or as members of entire local families of sorcerers, men and women alike.<sup>40</sup> Their authority to expel demons and the style of exorcism employed to do so had been established since Babylonian times, when their predecessors acted as the well-respected white-robed priests of the native gods.<sup>41</sup> In late Sasanian and early Islamic times they were still held in high esteem, and their social position within the community was a vital one. Therefore, notwithstanding their own adherence to paganism, they would be consulted by a clientele consisting of pagans, Jews, Christians, and later Muslims to satisfy the deeply rooted superstitions of these customers by means of special charms and amulets.<sup>42</sup> These magic objects were prepared in complicated rituals, during which the sorcerer would stretch out his arms or raise them at the elbows in an attitude of

invocation or exorcism and mumble magical spells or chant the liturgy of demons.<sup>43</sup>

However, the activity of sorcerers was not restricted to this kind of exorcism alone. They would also be consulted to heal clients by casting out the demons of disease or by releasing the patients from curses laid on them by demons and their evil human allies.<sup>44</sup> Thus at the end of the eighth century people were still frequenting local sorcerers to cure illnesses in the family.<sup>45</sup> Often the sorcerer was asked to take a hand in the social affairs of his customers, such as assisting a suitor in obtaining the permission of a girl's family for marriage.<sup>46</sup> It will be clear from these comments that sorcerers were an important group in Mesopotamian society, and their presence was usually required if not welcomed. Knowing this, many sorcerers would travel to important and well-frequented marketplaces to offer their services, which were eagerly called upon, even if they often included activities with a touch of the charlatan about them, like fortune-telling and conjuring tricks.<sup>47</sup>

Although pagan sorcerers were the most typical consultants for the superstitious population of Mesopotamia and on the grounds of their widespread popularity were long tolerated even by the new Muslim overlords, they were not the only ones.<sup>48</sup> Many sorcerers adhered to the Jewish faith, and thus practiced their art on the basis of their religion, utilizing charms and amulets with letters of the Holy Name, passages of Holy Writ, or the ancient symbol of Solomon's seal, and invoking angels to fight off evil spirits.<sup>49</sup> Sorcerers could also be found among the Christian community, and in the fifth century A.D. Christian priests and deacons were known to practice pagan magic and prognostications on the basis of astrology and the motion of the stars.<sup>50</sup> Finally, after the victory of Islam, many sorcerers continued their art as adherents to the new faith, or newly converted Muslims would make pagan sorcery their professional domain by issuing protective amulets or charms and utilizing many other ancient magical methods and practices.<sup>51</sup>

A very popular way of exercising protective magic was the production of special incantation bowls of coarse pottery, onto which the sorcerers themselves would write protective spells against the planetary demons in order to avert harm from their customers.<sup>52</sup> The use of such magical epigraphy was considered of greatest importance, not only to satisfy the superstitions of humble individuals in the villages and towns, but also as protection for the community as a whole. In later Islamic times many city gates still carried prominent

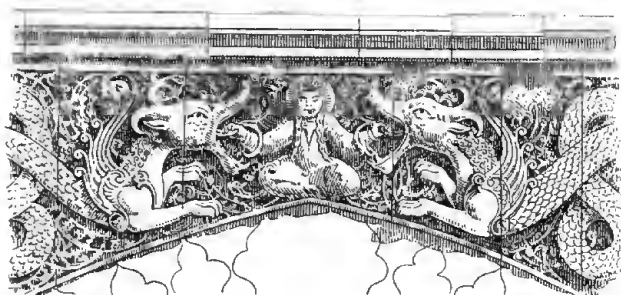
epigraphic panels, evoking good fortune and averting evil influences.<sup>53</sup>

Often these protective written spells were completed or replaced by evidently magical images, as for example on the famous Talisman Gate in Baghdad, erected in 1221 (fig. 3).<sup>54</sup> Here, a crowned haloed figure is shown seated in crosslegged, frontal position, grasping the tongues of two dragons, which have entwined and knotted snake-like bodies, wings and feline forelegs. This image, known to the people of Mesopotamia since the times of Sumer and Akkad in many representations that were iconographically very similar, has most likely magical and astrological connotations.<sup>55</sup> The motif of the entwined ferocious dragons has been seen as a reference to the pseudoplanetary nodes of the moon's orbit, which were held responsible for the solar and lunar eclipse and were occurrences regarded with fearful awe.<sup>56</sup> The human figure, seemingly holding the two monsters at bay by grasping their tongues, lends itself to several interpretations. The crowned prince may represent the sun, trying to avert the ecliptic dragons or — if one takes the whole image as a single iconographic unit — he may be interpreted as a personification of the pseudo-planet Jawhar with the entwined dragons as attributes, again symbolizing the planetary nodes of the moon's orbit. Both iconographical subjects find numerous parallels in the decorative arts of the time, and they always appear in an astrological context.<sup>57</sup> Here, the effectiveness of these ecliptic forces has been curtailed by the knots in the dragons' bodies, enchainning, according to popular belief, any evil spirits and preventing the negative influences of the ecliptic demons from entering the city and its buildings.<sup>58</sup>

Yet while in the thirteenth century and in later years such magical gate emblems may have been considered sufficient to avert evil forces and astral demons from the

whole community, in the early days of Islam, this task was effectively still a matter for the individual to undertake on his own behalf. He it was who took great care to ensure comprehensive protection against the negative influences of the planetary gods and their evil demons by commissioning magic charms and incantation bowls with exorcising spells from local sorcerers.

A large number of these incantation bowls have survived into modern time, most of them originating from the Mesopotamian town of Nippur. Their layout is very characteristic. In the center — often framed by a more or less accurately drawn circle — are depicted single figures representing either sorcerers or demons (fig. 4). Surrounding these images concentrically are the actual incantations, written in various dialects of Aramaic, the language of the large majority of people living in Mesopotamia in early Islamic times.<sup>59</sup> One such bowl, datable to the beginning of the seventh century A.D. (fig. 5), shows in its circular center the frontal figure of a demon, dressed in a long gown which is belted at the waist and expands to a characteristic triangular shape below. On his head he wears a black pointed cap. His feet are dressed in short, pointed boots, and his legs are chained together at the ankles. His arms are extended sideways and seem curiously bent at the elbows. The demon



3. The Talisman Gate in Baghdad, dated 1221. (From Friedrich Sarre, *Jahrbuch d. K. Preuss. Kunstsammlung*, 1905.)



4. Bowl from Tell Abu Sarifa with a figure of a sorcerer in the center. (From M. G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*.)



5. Demon with ankles bound. On an incantation bowl from Nippur. Chicago, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, Nippur 10 NA, no. A33964. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

holds a torch-like device with a large flame or flag in his right hand, and a staff or spade in his left hand.

The exact significance of the objects is difficult to explain. Perhaps they are intended to symbolize the demon's or sorcerer's power over light and darkness, or, more concretely, they may represent attributes of one of the demonic planets such as Saturn, who even in later centuries is often depicted with various unidentified objects and in addition is shown wearing a pointed cap.<sup>60</sup> An identification of the image with this particular planet seems feasible, considering the special significance of Saturn in the superstitions of the period. From ancient times onwards, Saturn had often been identified as the planet of the Babylonian god Nergal, who as Lord of the Underworld commanded the fear and resentment of the Mesopotamian population. The veneration of Saturn therefore sprang from the anxious desire to keep the influence of this maleficent planet at bay.<sup>61</sup> Special magical ceremonies were held on Saturdays in pagan centers like Harran, and special orisons were murmured on these occasions. The one related by the fourteenth-century writer al-Dimashqi in his famous cosmographic treatise indicates quite clearly the devotees' attitude toward the venerated deity:

Be Thou sanctified, oh Lord  
in whom evil is inherent,  
who does no good,  
since he represents misfortune and misery;  
who, when he encounters the beautiful,  
desecrates it;  
who looks at the fortunate and by this look  
devastates him.<sup>62</sup>

In early Islamic times astrologers still considered Zuhā (the Arabic term for Saturn) as a star of great misfortune, whose malevolent influence was even greater than that of the equally feared planet Mars. Saturn was held responsible for ruin, grief, and devastation, and its conjunctions with Jupiter and other planets, or the second maleficent planet of misfortune, Mars, were observed carefully in order to be able to predict any imminent alarming alterations to the course of history.<sup>63</sup> Given the evil nature of this particular planetary deity, it seems obvious that the exorcism of its demonic aspects must have been of foremost importance to the superstitious population of Mesopotamia. Therefore its depiction on a magic incantation bowl like the one described here seems quite plausible.

A closer examination of the enigmatic objects held by the demon represented on the bowl seems to confirm their identification as attributes of the planetary deity Saturn. As already mentioned, the device in the figure's left hand seems to resemble a spade or shovel. Such a tool would correspond well to the planet's ancient association with the Mesopotamian god Nergal, the Lord of the Underworld, and, according to some sources, also the Master of the Fields in the earlier days of his existence in the contemporary pantheon.<sup>64</sup> But more than that, it seems that from early times a well-known iconographic formula might have associated the representation of the planet Saturn with a spade as one of his attributes.

Indirect proof for this can be found centuries later among the celestial illustrations of the *ʿAjāʾib al-Makh-lūqāt* by the thirteenth-century writer Zakariyya b. Muhammad b. Mahmud al-Qazwini, copied in the fifteenth century.<sup>65</sup> In this edition of the cosmographic treatise, which is undoubtedly based on much more ancient models in text and illustrations alike, Saturn is shown holding a shovel as his attribute (fig. 6).<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, artifacts attributed to centuries far removed from the time that the incantation bowl was produced may also help to suggest an identification of the second object in the demon's right hand. Notwithstanding the device's obvious similarity to a flag or





6. The symbol of Saturn from a 15th-century manuscript of al-Qazwini's *Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt*. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art 54.37R. Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution.

torch, it may also symbolize a sickle — an attribute of Saturn still found, for example, on the interior of the lid of a pencease made by Mahmud b. Sunqur in 1281.<sup>67</sup>

Whatever the deeper meaning of the image, the bowl that bears it, like many others, played a vital part in popular superstition among pagans and religious communities alike, and could be found in numerous households long into the early years of Islamic rule. It was placed upside down inside the walls or on the threshold to ensure the successful imprisonment of the harmful demon.<sup>68</sup> Even members of the new Muslim ruling class often safeguarded themselves against potential harm from evil spirits — not by trusting in their faith, but by adhering to certain pagan rites and the belief in the

power of magic. Even in the eighth century the Umayyad prince and later caliph Walid b. Yazid ensured the magical entrapment of any demons trying to enter the divan, or the throne hall, of his desert residence Khirbat al-Majjar by having specially designed mosaics with magical knot designs placed on the thresholds of both rooms.<sup>69</sup> Similar knot designs were employed in the churches of Syria and Palestine in those days, a clear indication that the magic residues of pagan times were eagerly incorporated into Christian worship as well.<sup>70</sup> With the gradual spread of Islam such pagan beliefs were certainly reduced to some extent, but nevertheless among large numbers of the population the old superstitions, and with them the constant resorting to magic, remained common even after their conversion.<sup>71</sup>

Given this state of mind among the people of early Islamic Iraq, it seems quite probable that ancient magic objects and images survived for a long time under the new faith, and moreover started to influence local arts and crafts produced under the new Islamic rulers. The medium most receptive to such influences must have been pottery, since it was indispensable in daily life and therefore produced in many workshops all over Mesopotamia for a large, predominantly local clientele. Evidence that such ancient magical features were adopted on the pottery of Mesopotamia in the early Islamic period can be found in the decorative schemes of many large watercoolers of porous, unglazed clay, adorned with molded, incised and barbotine ornament.

These vessels, known as *ḥabb*, could commonly be found standing in the courtyards of ordinary Muslim houses or set upright in the ground underneath the houses to drain moisture from the surrounding soil.<sup>72</sup> The earliest extant Islamic jars of this type — attributed to the ninth century — often carry friezes of several saucer-eyed female figures in long skirts and long-necked bird-headed monsters,<sup>73</sup> applied to the surface in wet clay by hand and, more characteristically, in the barbotine technique, i.e., by using a pipette.<sup>74</sup> These mysterious figures can be traced back directly to the pottery of Babylonian and Assyrian times, where they appear in very similar fashion and are likewise executed in barbotine. Their iconographical significance also remained unchanged throughout the centuries. The female figures represent the ancient goddess Ishtar and the mythical animal the long-necked beast Sirrush, depicted on the Ishtar Gate in Babylon.<sup>75</sup>

The fact that Islamic potters up to the twelfth century perpetuated ancient pagan images on their wares shows once again that the old gods retained enough magical

and astrological significance to be considered indispensable in daily life. These storage jars, although probably manufactured for practical use in the first instance, might well have been used for magical purposes as well, not unlike the specially prepared incantation bowls.<sup>76</sup>

Among the contemporary pottery of early Islamic times, the monochrome lusterwares certainly claimed a much more important position and may not have been intended for the wear and tear of daily use, considering their exquisite execution and their bold luster decoration. However, it is a piece from this category of Mesopotamian ceramics that may once again yield evidence for the survival of local pagan images of the type discussed above. It seems to show that incantation bowls and other objects were adapted to a new ceramic context with a now predominantly Islamic background.

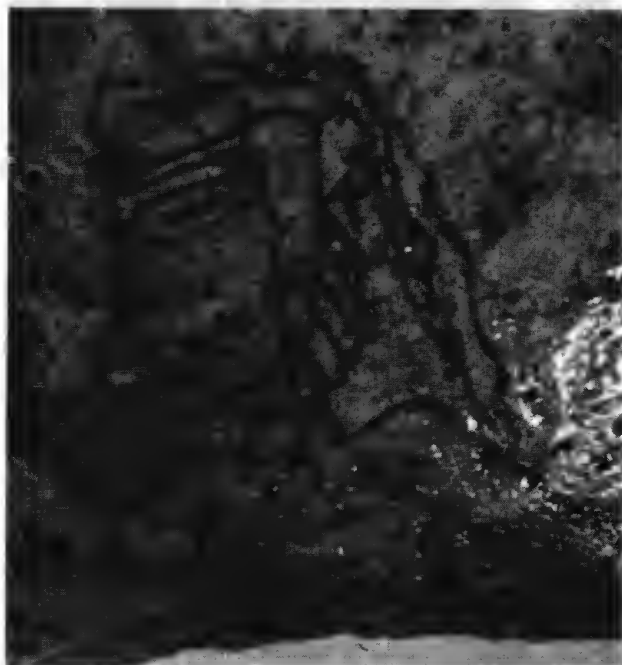
The object in question (fig. 7) is a large luster bowl with a naively drawn figure, apparently a man who carries in both hands a large flowing banner, which covers most of the bowl's upper half. Three areas — two of them circular at the front and center of the banner, and one rectangular at the back — decorated the standard. The large circle contains an inscription to be read from the top. This may be read *الملك* (dominion). The figure, which is shown walking sideways to the left but

with a frontal head, is flanked on the left by two large, superimposed half-palmettes and to the right by a vertically positioned bird, most likely a peacock, to judge by its large head ornament and its extensive tail feathers. All these major decorative motifs are surrounded by narrow white margins and set against a background of densely placed dots.<sup>77</sup>

Several details of this bowl seem to establish a link with the pre-Islamic pagan incantation bowl mentioned above. The first clue lies in an interesting similarity between the two main figures. Both wear gowns, which expand to a curious triangular shape below the waist, and pointed hats with slightly concave sides. The cap of the Islamic figure shows in addition a long tress with an angular forehead below. This motif is characteristic of many other Abbasid luster figures. Although these details do not occur on the incantation bowl under discussion, they can be found on a related contemporary piece. This piece depicts a sketchily drawn, bearded figure with a curious headdress terminating in a long wavy tress and displays the very same treatment of the forehead underneath the cap (fig. 8). Other possible similarities can be found in the attributes of both fig-



7. Early Islamic monochrome luster bowl. Paris, Louvre, MAO 23.



8. Bearded figure with long hair on an Aramaic incantation bowl from Nippur. Chicago, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, P59773/N39454. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.



ures, and it seems tempting to see the exaggerated banner on the luster plate as a free and out-of-context interpretation of the original torch-like device of the pagan demon.

Finally, the general design of the luster bowl may derive its ultimate inspiration from the same source. At first sight the characteristic white margins around the broadly drawn motifs and the densely dotted background appear highly innovative. However, if one keeps in mind pre-Islamic prototypes such as the popular incantation bowls, this treatment might also have been derived from them. The central figures are usually enclosed in more or less accurately drawn circles indicated only by thin lines and drawn against a white background. The remaining space on the bowls is filled with densely written script, which appear from a distance as irregular dots. The treatment may have inspired the layout of the Islamic bowl, but the design has been greatly modified and abstracted in accordance with new tastes and attitudes. By the ninth or tenth century the ancient superstitions may well have sunk to the level of popular folklore, which often in turn must have resulted in a loss of context.

However, a certain degree of superstition may still underlie the iconography of the luster piece. Perhaps it is an astrological background which led to the depiction of these particular images. Many other luster plates and objects have direct connections to classical star and planet images, as Dr. Zick-Nissen has shown, and in general, astrology retained a major role in medieval Islamic society. The inscription — if the reading is correct — seems to underline the possibility that this piece might still have some magic significance even if it has now acquired an Islamic undertone. The craftsman may have intended to evoke some supernatural support, presumably for his customer, in order to reinforce the latter's power.

Given the various parallels between pre-Islamic Aramaic incantation bowls and the early Islamic luster dish under discussion — both from Mesopotamia — it seems feasible to suggest that apart from the various indirect foreign influences on monochrome lusterwares there might have been a very direct continuous iconographic tradition of adapting local pagan images to a new Islamic context.

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## NOTES

1. Geza Fehérvári, "Two Early 'Abbāsid Lustre Bowls and the Influence of Central Asia," *Oriental Art* N.S. 9 (1963): 79–88.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
3. Emil Esin, *A History of Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Turkish Culture* (Supplement to the Handbook on Turkish Culture Series II) vol. 1/b (Istanbul, 1980), pp. 136, 141, 159, 164.
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